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The Strange Loop: Paradoxical Hierarchies in Borges's Fictions

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The Strange Loop: Paradoxical Hierarchies in Borges's Fictions

by

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ABSTRACT

In *Gödel, Escher, and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas Hofstadter studies how three great minds created their own version of what he calls the “Strange Loop.” The Strange Loop is a paradoxical construction, a shift from one level of abstraction to another that somehow gives rise to a closed, eternal cycle. In other words, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out. I argue that this paradoxical model is prevalent in Jorge Luis Borges’s short stories and that by applying Hofstadter’s model to Borges’s prose, we are able to better explore Borges’s belief in literature’s unique power to create spatiotemporal paradoxes. I argue that in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges was fascinated by the idea that by manipulating the objective nature of book, one could generate new possibilities of time and space. I analyze how Borges creates Strange Loops in impossible linkages between distinct narrative frames in both “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” and “The Gospel According to Mark.” Lastly, I demonstrate how Borges composes an architectural Strange Loop in “The Immortal.”

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The Strange Loop: Paradoxical Hierarchies in Borges's Fictions

In the Pulitzer-prize winning book *Gödel, Escher, and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*,¹ Douglas Hofstadter studies how three great minds created their own version of what he calls the “Strange Loop.” The Strange Loop, he writes, “occurs whenever, by movement upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (*GEB* 10). Hofstadter dabbles in all kinds of content in exploring this Strange Loop phenomena — music, fine art, mathematics, philosophy, computer science, literature, etc. — but Hofstadter claims that Gödel, Escher, and Bach are the exemplary practitioners of the Strange Loop. According to Hofstadter, all three figures’ work is characterized by

a shift from one level of abstraction to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, *despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out*. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop (*Strange Loop* 101-102, my emphasis).

Similar to ascending an endless staircase, a Strange Loop moves further and further away from a starting point, yet ultimately ends up exactly where it began due to an impossible, tangled hierarchy of levels. In Bach’s music, the path of this loop was along a piano keyboard, constructing his mind-bending fugues in such a way so that their so-called endings tie smoothly back again to the piece’s beginning, gesturing toward an endlessly-ascending composition. Escher created the Strange Loop illusion of a three dimensional plane, fashioning stairs, waterfalls, and inextricable patterns with no more than a writing implement and paper. And

Gödel wove his Strange Loop in the form of a self-referential proof, a mathematical rendering of the paradoxical statement, “This statement is false.”

Though Hofstadter initially started his research with Gödel, the boundaries of his researched ballooned quite majestically into many disciplines. But he confesses that “to [his] mind, the most beautiful and powerful visual realizations of this notion of Strange Loops exist in the work of the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher” (*GEB* 10). And so to help us better visualize this Strange Loop, consider Escher’s “Ascending and Descending” (1960). This piece provides a clear example of this Strange Loop mechanism. In this image (see Fig. 1), genderless, anonymous figures walk up (or down?) a flight of stairs, only to find themselves back at the same point that they had been at some point before. It is impossible to tell where or when their “starting point” might have been. The paradoxical nature of the image relies on the established spatial and chronological preconception that stairs can take you upwards or downwards, but not both at the same time. If we didn’t expect the stairs in “Ascending and Descending” to start at one place and then allow a given figure to travel to a new level, then we would likely even fail to recognize the paradox as a paradox. The impossible construction would perhaps seem only meaningless or trivial without our overturned expectations, without the expectation of a successive upward movement. But in Escher’s image, ascending and descending are surprisingly, unexpectedly interchangeable. There is no way to tell which way is up.

As we see in “Ascending and Descending,” the Strange Loop is a two-step process. The first critical feature of this so-called Strange Loop is movement “away” from a perceived point of “origin.” I use quotations to indicate the difficulty of these terms from inside the Strange Loop. Once inside a Strange Loop, direction and points of origin seem entirely ambiguous. Though Hofstadter uses terms like “hierarchy” and “upwards” in his description of this

phenomena, such language is used more as a means of describing the vertiginous *sensation* of a Strange Loop rather than technically describing how the Strange Loop works. In fact, Hofstadter maintains that the hierarchy of the Strange Loop is fundamentally metaphorical, and thus so-called spatial orientation is of no consequence: “Sometimes [the Strange Loop] will be hidden, other times it will be out in the open; sometimes it will be right side up, other times it will be upside down, or backwards” (*GEB* 10). Orientation is entirely relative. In other words, though we might assume that “hierarchy” demands a kind of vertical construction like a staircase, direction is actually negligible. For additional proof, one need only look at Escher’s “Relativity” (1953) to see that Strange Loops are impervious to orientation (see Fig. 2). The second critical feature of the Strange Loop is the unexpected, paradoxical return to the point of origin, despite a uninterrupted movement *away* from that same origin. So what is really occurring in the Strange Loop is not strictly a hierarchy violation, but a violation of our sense of *causality*: “I climb this staircase upwards from the first floor and *then* I reach the second floor.” The Strange Loop occurs when the sentence changes to: “I climb this staircase upwards from the first floor and arrive at the first floor.” This violation can occur in *any* instance where a cause-and-effect relationship is expected. Thus, the Strange Loop can also be applied to non-spatial situations.

Though Hofstadter extends the implications of his Strange Loop into a wide variety of disciplines, he falls short of deeply considering its presence in literature. Hofstadter mentions literary figures like Lewis Carroll, but does not explore their skills as Strange Loop creators (Parker 22). In light of this gap, literary critics have proposed that there ought to be a fourth candidate for Hofstadter’s canon of Strange Loop creators: postmodern short story writer and master of meta-fiction, Jorge Luis Borges. Certainly, Hofstadter was aware of Borges. In *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern*, Hofstadter points out the

parallels between the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics and Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths." He also includes Borges's pseudo personal essay, "Borges and I" in an anthology on self-reference and self-representation. But in both cases, the analysis is rather cursory, leaving other critics to take up the task. Allene M. Parker argues in that Escher's compact self-referentiality and repetition "is a description that can be readily applied to Borges' work" that has, in fact, been long noticed by other critics (12, 14). Katherine Hayles likewise aligns Borges with Gödel under Hofstadter's Strange Loop model, claiming that Borges has a predilection for self-referentiality, involving the reader "in the circle of the fiction's Strange Loop" (37, 151). Even critics who do not use Hofstadter's short hand for the Strange Loop phenomena often describe the same occurrence. In one particularly notable example, Anthony Fragols points out that Borges's "progression from the linear to the circular is consistent with the general theory of relativity which holds that 3-D space is both limited and unlimited, linear and circular" (60). In this theory, we could "hop on a light beam, rush along its straight trajectory and find ourselves *back where we started*" (qtd in Fragols 60, my emphasis). The language in this discussion of the general theory of relativity and Hofstadter's Strange Loop is almost uncanny, reinforcing the robust claim that Borges ought to be included in the proverbial Strange Loop canon.

But for all the needfulness and successes in these analyses, there are some critical missteps. In his article "Drawing Borges: A Two-Part Invention on the Labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges and M.C. Escher," Parker's main rationale for casting Borges as a Strange Loop master is Borges's fixation on the labyrinth as both motif and structure for his short stories. Parker argues that a labyrinth is, by definition, a Strange Loop. To establish this, Parker first argues that one must differentiate between a maze and a labyrinth. In a maze, an individual traversing a flat

plane must start at the entrance, or point of origin, and make it through a series of blind turns before making it to an entirely different point in space. In a labyrinth however, an individual starts at the point of origin and must traverse through those various turns in order to return again to the point of origin (see Fig. 3). In a maze, the entrance and exit are not the same point. In a labyrinth, the entrance is simultaneously an exit. “[T]hus,” Parker concludes, “a labyrinth fits Hofstadter’s [sic] definition of a strange loop” (12). Parker states that the labyrinth, by virtue of its construction, leads the reader unexpectedly back to the point at which one has started.

However, Parker’s conclusion that labyrinths are essentially manifestations of the Strange Loop phenomena is baffling, namely, because a normal labyrinth, as Parker describes it, does not necessitate the critical element of *undisrupted movement away from the point of origin*. While one has to *initially* move away from the point of origin in order to begin to traverse a labyrinth, there eventually will come a point where that person is blocked and must once again retrace their steps. To use our staircase metaphor, it would be analogous to a person walking up from floor one to floor two, but then stopping, turning around, and walking down the stairs again to floor one. There is no surprise in the return to the first floor because their movement *away* from that floor has been *disrupted*. Additionally, there is no paradox to a point in space acting simultaneously as entrance and exit; one can walk through a door frame from both directions without creating any kind of spatial incongruity. Hofstadter addresses this fact in his book by emphasizing how important the element of undisrupted movement away from the point of origin is to the Strange Loop:

A Tangled Hierarchy [a system that contains a Strange Loop] occurs when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by *surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way*. The surprise element is important; it is the reason I call Strange Loops

‘strange’. A simple tangle, like feedback, doesn’t involve violations of presumed level distinctions (691, my emphasis).

As I mentioned before, Hofstadter often relies on the language of hierarchy when describing Strange Loops. But we could just as well call this phenomena a violation of causation. Hierarchy is the easiest metaphor, but it is not the only way. But in the way Parker describes a labyrinth, there is no Strange Loop at all because there is no such violation (*GEB* 691).

Other critics have been more successful in tracing the Strange Loop model in Borges’s fictions. Critic N. Katherine Hayles, in a chapter on infinite series and transfinite numbers in Borges’s fictions, links Borges and Gödel together via Cantor’s set theory. Hayles points out that Borges had declared that he had found the “spells of mathematics” and that “Strange Loops are the essence” of these spells (142). In his fictions, Hayles outlines Borges’s strategy for rendering the Strange Loop in his stories:

The first step in his strategy is to transform a continuity into a succession of points, and to suggest that these points form a sequence; there follows the insinuation that the sequence progresses beyond the expected terminus to stretch into infinity; then the sequence is folded back on itself, so that closure becomes impossible because of the endless, paradoxical circling of a self-referential system. This complex strategy (which may not appear in its entirety in any given story) has the effect of dissolving the relation of the story to reality, so that the story becomes an autonomous object existing independently of any reality. The final step is to suggest that our world, like the fiction, is a self-contained entity whose connection with reality is problematic or nonexistent (143).

The Strange Loop has a vertiginous effect on those who perceive it. Like any paradox, the Strange Loop is rife with indeterminacies and it sometimes seems as if the Strange Loop has the

capacity to influence or change our perception of the world *in which we ourselves live*. Though we would never look at Escher's "Ascending and Descending" and wonder if the same phenomena could happen to *our* staircases, other modes of the Strange Loop, like literary modes, sometimes generate more uncertainty. Hayles is one such critic who emphasizes that this is exactly what Borges does in his own fiction, going so far as to say that "the final step in Borges's seductive strategy, [is] the inclusion of the reader himself in the circle of the fiction's Strange Loop" (151).

At first glance, this seems to be the natural conclusion of the Strange Loop: a truly indeterminate form would encompass everything around it. However, it's important to note here that this Strange Loop experiment will always be incomplete because of its inherent inability to be all encompassing. Though the Strange Loop is linked to infinity with its indiscernible and impossible beginnings and endings, the Loop does not include the creator or interpreter (*GEB* 15). Hofstadter elaborates on this point by describing a paradox called the authorship triangle (Fig. 4). In the authorship triangle, author Z is actually a character in author T's novel and author T is a character in author E's book who is actually written by author Z. Hofstadter points out that this funny puzzle is nonetheless misleading because there will always be an author H who has written authors Z, T, and E — in this particular case, Hofstadter. "Although Z, T, and E all have access—direct or indirect—to each other," he writes, "and can do dastardly things to each other in their various novels, none of them can touch H's life!" (*GEB* 689).

Likewise, Borges's vertiginous Strange Loops are confined to his fictions. Though Borges is a talented literary experimenter, he is unable to actually involve us in a Strange Loop ourselves and endanger us with a paradox, as Hayles suggests. In fact, this type of Strange Loop innovation,

always ends up reconfirming the authority of one narrator who *does* remain at a so-called ‘inviolable level’ [...] The reader knows that the characters can only emerge from stories and talk back to narrators *in stories*, and so questioning of narratorial authority within the story ultimately confirms the existence of such authority outside it (Heise 62).

We as readers are always able to trust in that a story has an authorial origin. For any of the short stories analyzed here, we can identify the our fellow Borges is its progenitor and thus, we remain just as untouchable from the story as he is.

It is likely that the critical move Hayles makes in including the reader in Borges’s Strange Loop is largely “poetic” (Bloch 133). Such a move mirrors what Borges himself seems to be attempting or suggesting throughout his fictions, even if it actually fails on a narratological level. “Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*?” Borges asks in “Partial Enchantments of the Quixote.” “I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers and spectators, can be fictitious” (196). It’s unclear whether Borges felt that the Strange Loop could *actually* break out of the authorship quandary; but at the very least, Borges was keenly aware of literature’s unique ability to house a disturbing or thought-provoking illusion of all-encompassing Strange Loop and he makes gestures toward that end in his stories, inviting us to fall down the proverbial rabbit hole.

The critical analysis already conducted concerning the usefulness of Hofstadter’s Strange Loop model and its application to Borges’s fictions has already been noted in these and other critics. Yet, as Parker’s serious misstep shows, more rigorous application ought to be conducted. And where some critics like Hayles, Bloch and others focus on more technical readings, noting mathematical features of Borges’s fictions, I maintain that Borges’s own poetics cannot wholly

be reduced to set theory or geometry. Borges chose literature — not mathematics, nor music, nor any other discipline — as his main vehicle for rendering the Strange Loop. Here, I shall explore this idea in four separate texts: “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (1944), “The Gospel According to Mark” (1970), and “The Immortal” (1949). Though I will not discuss the entirety of these stories, I will pinpoint specific examples of the Borgesian Strange Loop. I shall analyze “The Garden of Forking Paths” first. Not only is it the earliest of these four works, but it is perhaps one of Borges’s most known and critically explored texts, and presents one of the strongest examples of how Borges manipulates the idea of a physical manuscript so that it displays its spatiotemporal-violating features. Analysis of “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” illuminates how Borges uses the unique literary feature of narrative frames, creating paradoxical transference between them, so as to form a Strange Loop. The last two stories are by far the most subtle and so have been reserved for last. Borges suggests in “The Gospel According to Mark” that literature is pregnant with impossible repetitions of history and that the narrating of stories can induce paradox. And lastly in “The Immortal,” Borges creates a city that seems to have leapt straight out of one of Escher’s lithographic prints, offering us an architectural Strange Loop. All four of these stories demonstrate different facets of Borges’s essay into the Strange Loop phenomena, and demonstrate how Borges saw in the very mechanics of literature a unique capacity for paradox and spatiotemporal violation.

We see throughout the Borgesian canon that Borges was fascinated by the idea that by manipulating the objective nature of book, one could generate new possibilities — even Strange Loop inducing possibilities — of time and space. Borges certainly used non-literary symbols and devices to explore these metaphysical possibilities — like the fantastical phenomena called the Aleph, a single point in the universe that “presents time and space simultaneously” (Boulter

362). But Borges the “man of letters” was steeped in the written word. It seems, to paraphrase Joyce, that literature was a summons to Borges’s blood.² Within his stories, Borges creates many fantastical tomes. In “The Book of Sand,” the protagonist is introduced to a book that “is literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last,” which inspires one character to muse, “If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time” (*Collected Fictions* 482). In “The Library of Babel,” the entire library is “perfect, complete, and whole” and yet therein exists “a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium of all other books, and some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god” (116). And in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges explores two fantastical manuscripts. The first book mentioned — only in passing — is “a cyclical, or circular volume, a volume whose last page would be identical to the first so that one might go on indefinitely” (125). The second book, which we shall discuss later, is Ts’ui Pen manuscript.

But what is the link between a book’s objective properties (its physical existence with weight, ink, pages, etc.), space, and time? For Borges, the fact that books have “measurable dimensions and a set of typographic characters printed on leaves or pages” is actually critically significant (Spencer 187). Typographic characters on a page are not simply spatial elements that take up room on a page, but temporal ones, since they require time to read and must be aligned in syntactically acceptable order so that they can be understood. “Written language, especially when configured in narrative structures, is forced to present time in a medium that operates on the basis of discrete, digital units: words,” Ursula Heise writes (62). In literary narrative, “[p]rint typography and the book format place a number of ‘natural’ constraints on how temporality can be presented, [...] some postmodern texts foreground and exploit these particular constraints [by] disarticulate[ing] time into moments through their non-linear typography” (Heise 62-63). An

alternative conception of a book's physicality and thus, a book's traditional representation of time, has the possibility of gesturing toward the possibility of a literary Strange Loop. The postmodern tendency to reject grand metanarratives — even ones so seemingly elemental and unbreakable as the concepts of time and space — lends to an “aesthetic of fragmentation and discontinuity” (Spencer 186). From the Bible to the *bildungsroman*, literature has a long tradition of mimicking human perception of time, and postmodern writers in particular have experimented with its manipulation by dissecting or reorganizing a text's physical representation.

Borges was not the only thinker to have considered these spatial and temporal qualities embedded in literature. There are three in particular that coalesce with Borges nicely. First is Marc Saporta's loose leaf novel *Composition No. 1* (1962). *Composition No. 1* is a stack of unbound pages (distributed in boxes) and can be read in any order that the user chooses. Each page holds a self-contained narrative, which can be shuffled as the reader pleases. The unbound text cues the reader to understand that they are central in organizing their own experience with the text. The reader can leave the order of the book as is. Or they may leave out some pages and choose to re-read others. The book does not *necessitate* the creation of a Strange Loop, but by allowing the book to be reshuffled, it is conceivable for a creative reader to link together a narrative cycle, organizing a story that ends where it begins, so that its first page corresponds with its last. The second text comes from Julio Cortázar, who published his own short fictions in Borges's literary journal, *Los anales de Buenos Aires* and is commonly cited as one of the Spanish-American masters of the short story. (Borges also wrote an introduction to Cortázar's *Stories*.) Cortázar is perhaps best known for his work *Hopscotch* (1963), a novel cited as one of the most famous experiments with narrative order in the novel after the Second World War (Heise 77). *Hopscotch* can be read two different ways. The first is to read the book normally,

following the pages in sequential order to read a rather straightforward and linear story. The other option is to take a “radically non-linear itinerary” that leaps back and forth between the book’s chapters on the author’s pre-outlined path (Heise 77). Cortázar’s two reading paths never create a Strange Loop, but it offers a clear example of the way in which a text’s physical manipulation offers a counter to temporal preconceptions. And the third innovative experiment (and a more contemporary example) is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2011). “I took my favorite book, Bruno Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles*,” Safran Foer explains, “and by removing words carved out a new story” (Heller). Any given “page” is the result of various incisions of varying depths into the host book, so that each page of text is actually made of up many words from many different pages. Carefully placed holes claim a new story within the body of the old. While before, a reader had to flip or read chronologically through a text to see the “future” of the story, in *Tree of Codes* this chronology is entirely circumvented as words from the future can actually be read as a link to the narrative past (or present). The entire work is a innovative exploration of a book’s physicality; by subverting our traditional engagement with text, *Tree of Codes* suggests entirely new ways of conceptualizing narrative time. Each shared word in the text gestures toward a kind of physical expression of a Strange Loop, whereby a word exists in two separate narrative times simultaneously.

Borges never deconstructed his texts in the style of Saporta, Cortázar, or Safran Foer. Borgesian fictions read from front to back, top to bottom (with no literal incisions) as they usually do in the Western tradition. They generally follow a linear, identifiable plot. But Borges fulfils literature’s capacity for the Strange Loop, not by manipulating the physical text on the inviolate level, but by dissecting the book-as-object from *within* the confines of his narrative. Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” offers one of the most conspicuous examples of this in-

text dissection with Ts'ui Pen's infamous and mysterious novel manuscript, *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

In the story, the illustrious and educated governor Ts'ui Pen retires to the Pavilion of Limpid Solitude from his promising life as governor in order to accomplish a dual goal: to write a book and construct a maze (124). When Ts'ui Pen dies, he leaves behind “nothing but chaotic manuscripts” that are “senseless” and “contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts” (124). Only the sinologist and expert on Ts'ui Pen's work, Dr. Stephen Albert, is able to discover the manuscript's meaning. Albert tells Ts'ui Pen's grandson, Tsun, that

Ts'ui Pen must at one point have remarked, ‘I shall retire to write a book,’ and at another point, ‘I shall retire to construct a labyrinth.’ Everyone pictured two projects [...] The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* [the novel] is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen (124, 127).

Additionally, Ts'ui Pen's text is identified as symbol, both temporal and spatial, of the entire labyrinthine universe. This is rendered beautifully as the protagonist Tsun wonders at the mysterious legacy of his grandfather:

I meditated on that lost labyrinth: I pictured it perfect and inviolate on the secret summit of a mountain; I pictured its outlines blurred by rice paddies, or underwater; I pictured it as infinite — a labyrinth not of octagonal pavilions and paths that turn back upon themselves, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms... I pictured a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars (122).

Initially, Tsun believes that the novel and the labyrinth are two separate legacies from his grandfather. As it becomes clear that the novel and the labyrinth are one and the same, the text is

linked with the entire world spatially (as in Tsun's imagery of shapes and geography) and temporally (a labyrinth that encompasses both past and future).

But this manuscript is not a Baudrillardian simulacrum of the universe, a faithful, indistinguishable replication, like we see in Borges's "On Exactitude in Science." *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the novel inside the short story, is a Strange Loop, a paradoxical construction through the medium of text. In the case of Ts'ui Pen's novel, this hierarchy violation is done in two ways. First, Borges utilizes paradoxical descriptors to blur the boundaries of Ts'ui Pen's text, making it possible for the book to expand beyond its literary hierarchy. *The Garden of Forking Paths* is not an ordinary book. Characters in chapters are "parallel" and yet the characters impossibly "coalesce" (126).³ And in order to preserve this dizzying paradox, Borges does not give the reader any indication of the overarching story at work in the novel. We have no full understanding of the story of *The Garden of Forking Paths* as a means to refute the paradox. Because the novel is by its very nature impossible, too much disclosure would cause the illusion to dissipate entirely. The second way that Borges violates the hierarchy of chronological pages is through the manuscript's physical description. The term "loose pages" doesn't occur in the text of the story to describe *The Garden of Forking Paths*, but the so-called heap of drafts absolutely suggests that the pages of Ts'ui Pen's story were unbound. This detail seems only to remind us of Ts'ui Pen's early death and untimely murder, but the book's construction is actually highly significant. By presenting Ts'ui Pen's manuscript as an unbound work, Borges is releasing the work from the temporal and spatial constraints of a novel, much in the same way that Saporta, Cortázar, and Safran Foer tried to do in their own experimental prose. Our expectation of a text with a linear hierarchy of pages is undone when we are presented with a manuscript that can be so readily shuffled, like *Composition No. 1*.

Thus, Ts'ui Pen's manuscript is not simply a pile of pages, but a subversive, destabilizing experiment. Its pages are not only unbound, but impossible to reconstruct because it contains a contradictory, non-linear loop. "I once examined it myself," says Tsun to Dr. Albert, "in the third chapter the hero dies, yet in the fourth he is alive again" (124). The novel also contains "two versions of a single epic chapter" of an army marching into war in two unique circumstances (125).

One might be able to sort through a *traditional* book's jumbled pages and discern the original order, since we expect events to proceed within normal laws of causality and syntax. But Ts'ui Pên utilizes what Morson calls "sideshadowing," formulating for the characters a "*middle realm* [between actualities and impossibilities] of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not" (6). As Dr. Albert's explains to Tsun:

In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the world of virtually impossible-to-detangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses — simultaneously — all of them. *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures,' several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. In Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations (125).

Thus, similar to Escher's indeterminate point of origin for the stair-climbing figures in "Ascending and Descending," Ts'ui Pen's novel invokes an indeterminacy. No one chronological path in *The Garden of Forking Paths* has pre-eminence over the others. Though Dr. Albert, ironically, says that he has "re-established" the "fundamental order" of the manuscripts, he remains uncertain of whether this is actually the case (127). In fact, it is impossible to sort out these narrative paths at all. Though one might seem to be progressing from

page to page after beginning to read from the beginning, the story folds back on itself, continually violating basic rules of time and space in a contradictory, indeterminate plot.

Some may suspect that Dr. Albert's characterization of *The Garden of Forking Paths* might simply be a gross misunderstanding of a very basic literary device, the flashback, in which events or incidents that occurred prior to the opening scene of the work are subsequently presented after the fact. Could Tsun's complaint about the novel's hero dying in one chapter and then coming alive in the next simply be a failure to understand Ts'ui Pen's plotting?

If Borges's extensive and pointed discussion between Tsun and Dr. Albert on multiple futures and sideshadowing are not convincing on this point (Dr. Albert reiterates this idea of multiple times by discussing least three distinct examples), then Ts'ui Pen's own commentary on *The Garden of Forking Paths* is certainly damning to this theory. Though *The Garden of Forking Paths* is a mysterious entity, Ts'ui Pen's leaves behind one key clue to its interpretation: a letter which states, "I leave to the several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths" (125). This short letter is the key to Dr. Albert's theory. "Futures" is plural, not singular, as it would be should Ts'ui Pen's story been scrambled in a non-linear plot. The forking paths of the garden, a key symbol for Ts'ui Pen's manuscript, is a spatial description for "forking in time" (125). Thus, Ts'ui Pen himself puts forth the idea that there are multiple, infinite futures in his story, which Dr. Albert reveals later to Tsun. *The Garden of Forking Paths* is a Strange Loop. The story in *The Garden of Forking Paths* is multiple, and though Tsun and Dr. Albert begin from an arbitrary point of origin ("arbitrary" because it is suggested that the manuscript was recovered without regard or knowledge of the original page order) and read through the manuscript's pages, they are surprised when the story ends up right back where it started, as dead characters are resurrected and armies repeat their marches.

Borges also invokes this postmodern stratagem of creating a Strange Loop through the medium of literature in “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero.” In this short story, Borges takes us through the hierarchy of various frame stories, just as he does in the various layers in “The Garden of Forking Paths.” As readers, we come to a text with the literary preconception that frame stories are distinct from that which they are framing. The frames are merely related to the interior tale or tales. But we expect those individuals at a “higher” narrative level to be inviolate from the narrative level beneath them. In a text with multiple narrative frames, we have the sense of moving *away* from our outermost narrative frame and further *into* the center of the tale. But in “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” narrative frames influence each other in hierarchy-violating ways, creating a Strange Loop.

Because the story has an unusually long hierarchy of narrative layers, it is helpful here if I briefly summarize the text. In “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” the unnamed narrator (who we take to be a stand in for Borges himself) begins to tell of a story he has been thinking of writing. In this story, the character Ryan Kilpatrick is intent on writing a book about his now-dead great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick, a former leader in a conspiracy against the Irish government. As Ryan investigates his great-grandfather’s past, he discovers that the revolutionaries had amongst them a traitor. Fergus had charged another conspirator, James Nolan, the task of finding out the traitor. Ironically, Nolan finds irrefutable proof that Fergus is in fact the traitor and unmasks him before the revolutionaries. Fergus is dismayed at the discovery and puts himself at the mercy of the rebels. But rather than threaten the already tenuous strength of the revolution by executing the popular Fergus, Nolan hatches a plan to style Fergus as a martyr for the cause, adapting the assassination from material from *Julius Caesar*

and *Macbeth*. Ryan Kilpatrick discovers this bewildering truth and shaken by the implications of the plot, goes on to publish a book lying about the assassination.

There are various instances in the text where we see the Strange Loop emerge. The narrative travels downward through various narrative levels or frames, but these frame are then impossibly linked together in unexpected ways. We have our inviolate level where you and I as readers are reading Borges's written tale. Then we have the narrator's level, as he recounts a story he is thinking of writing. Underneath this level, the character Ryan Kilpatrick is researching for a book about his great-grandfather. The story of Fergus Kilpatrick is narrated to Ryan via historical documents, creating yet another narrative layer. And still further inwards (or downwards. As stated before, this kind of spatial language is largely metaphorical), we have Fergus's fellow rebel, Nolan, using other narrative material from *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* to style Fergus's death. Each narrative layer is nestled within the other like a matryoshka doll.⁴

We expect that each narrative layer be inviolate from the layer beneath it. Just as the characters of the story cannot reach out to endanger us the reader, so too do we expect that stories within stories *act* like stories. But in true meta-fictional style, Borges conflates the Fergus Kilpatrick's world and *our* world. We see this early in the text, the narrator says that the narrator of his story is Ryan, "the great-grandson of the young, heroic, beautiful, murdered Fergus Kilpatrick, whose grave was mysteriously violated, whose name gives luster to Browning's and Hugo's verses" (143). This, of course, is untrue, but cleverly so: Browning and Hugo are historical contemporaries to the fictional Fergus Kilpatrick. Thus, Browning and Hugo could not have written about this fictional character imagined by Borges in 1944. But Borges pinches the narrative frames together, bringing us unexpectedly back to our own inviolate level even as we are reading a story.

This intersection of the narrative levels continues. In the story, the Shakespearean play *Julius Caesar* — an actual literary piece that exists in our inviolate level and itself based on a *historical* event — inspires Nolan’s designs around Fergus’s execution in the theater. And in another instance, the narrator of the story says that the “the teeming drama played itself out in time, until August 6, 1824, in a box (refiguring Lincoln’s) draped with funereal curtains, when a yearned-for bullet pierced the traitor-hero’s breast” (145). Borges links the fictional execution of Fergus Kilpatrick — based on a fictional representation of a historical execution — to the real historical event of Lincoln’s execution. Borges suggests here that the fictional story has in fact influenced *our* world.

Then with a final Borgesian flourish, the narrator goes on to say that Ryan Kilpatrick knows that he is not immune to Nolan’s schemes: “Ryan realized that he, too, was part of Nolan’s plot... After long and stubborn deliberation, he decided to silence the discovery. He published a book dedicated to the hero’s [Fergus’s] glory; that too, perhaps, had been foreseen” (146). There are various ways to interpret these final moments. We as the reader can stand firmly in the inviolate level, unwilling to suspend belief, and say that the final moments of this story are of course foreseen because Borges knew the endgame to his own tale. But then we must ask how the character *within* Borges’s story could consider and comment upon his own narration. We could also say that Nolan foresaw Ryan’s actions and plotted them just as he plotted Fergus’s fictitious assassination. But this too, results in a Strange Loop: we have progressed in narrative time so that Nolan has no actual ability to posthumously plot Ryan’s life. “The idea that history might have copied history is mind-boggling enough,” Ryan Kilpatrick marvels in the story, “that history should copy *literature* is inconceivable...” (144). The inconceivable nature of this rests upon the preconception that I stated before: that each narrative level is “inviolate” from the story

that rests within it and that what is imagined cannot, in fact, be made real. But when Ryan's actions at the end of the story are "foreseen," the wall between these levels is cracked open, even if only for fleeting glances. We've travelled through a hierarchy of narrative levels only to find inexplicable connections between them.

But how does Borges accomplish this linking of narrative layers? One way that Borges demonstrates this conflation of the real and the literary is by blurring our perspective of the narrative process in "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." The narrator subtly offers conflicting theories about the creation and status of literary texts. At one point, he says that he has "conceived" (some translations say "imagined") his story plot. In the next sentence, the narrator is more passive, saying that "there are areas of the story that have never been revealed to me" (141). In the first instance, the narrator is the origin of the tale but in the very next instance, he is only the transmitter, describing only what is revealed to him. Of course, this notion might well be an inconsistent explication of the writing process. A character might very well be the origin of a story yet have the sense that it is "revealed" to their minds. But such vague descriptions give us the sense that though we indeed are receiving the story, we are unable to pinpoint the actual point of origin; unless, of course, we remind ourselves of the inviolate level and say that Borges, the flesh and blood man who walked this earth, wrote this story and we receive the tale from him. Yet Borges attempts to also align his person with that of the narrator. He gives us a narrator who speaks to his audience as if the narrator were actually Borges (a man who conceives of story plots) and to the audience as if they were actually us, the inviolate readers.

But Borges also subtly throws off our notion of the real and the fictional existing in separate realms in his diction. Ryan, for instance, is disturbed that Fergus's death "seem[s] to

repeat or combine events from distant places, distant ages” (144). The only events that are really repeated in history are *fictional* events. Thus fictional territory is not entirely removed from the real world, it is only “distant.” Fictional and real do not exist in separate realms, but are intricately, paradoxically connected, always uncertain of whether the fictional copied the historical, or the historical generated the fiction. This indeterminacy throughout the text is what allows for narrative layers to bleed into one another, joining narrative frames in a Strange Loop. Though we expect to be able to identify clean lines of differentiation of narrative times or layers and to proceed in a linear fashion through those layers, narratological and historical boundaries are blended, such that at various points in the story impossible repetitions emerge.

Of course, Borges never uses the exact term “Strange Loop,” but we see the language of this model surface throughout the story. As Ryan goes deeper and deeper into the investigation of his great-grandfather, certain “aspects of the mystery disturb Ryan; certain things seem almost *cyclical*, seem to repeat or combine events from distant places, distant ages” (144, my emphasis). Later, as Ryan lists the repetitions throughout his investigation, “[t]hese and other parallels [...] induce Ryan to imagine some secret shape of time, a pattern of repeating lines” (144). In this instance, we see the unique *literary* understand the Borges presents to us about time. Time looks a lot like a work of literature, and time seems to cohere with literature’s unique *spatial* qualities. Time in a narrative does not actually look like the traditional straight line with linear causation. Rather, the lines are stacked, as they are on a page, and are repeated in a cyclical fashion. It is a mystery, an “enigma [that] goes deeper than mere detective work can fathom” (144). As Ryan continues to investigate there is a moment where it seems that he “is saved from those circular labyrinths” by yet another discovery. But this too “plunge[s] him deep into another, yet more

tangled and heterogeneous mazes” with the mystery continuing into a kind of infinite narrative (144).

The entirety of “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” relies on our preconceived notions about the production and interpretation of texts. Annie Dillard explains that Borges is unique in that he

stress[es] the equal status of all mental objects. Imaginary or third-hand texts, or accounts of texts, have not only the same ontological status as canonical texts, but also the same status and capacity for meaning as actual events. And actual events may be interpreted as if they were texts. Everything on earth or in imagination is a conjunction of mental objects; it is an art object which may be interpreted critically (60).

In other words, the belief undergirding his creation of his various Strange Loops, at least in this particular story of the “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” is that the line distinguishing between literature and experience is blurred at best, if not wholly indistinguishable. “We are transported into a realm where fact and fiction, the real and the unreal, the whole and the part, the highest and the lowest, are complementary aspects of the same continuous being,” Irby writes. “Borges’s fictions grow out of the deep confrontation of literature and life which is not only the central problem of all literature but also that of all human experience: the problem of illusion and reality” (xvii, xix). As the narrator in “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” relates to us his not-yet-known story, he weaves together the seemingly disparate worlds of literature and reality and then seamlessly, eerily matches them end to end so that they are indistinguishable. Though we expect to travel in a linear fashion down the narrative layers, we keep inexplicably finding links to other narrative layers, clues that are completely out of place and are only possible with a Strange Loop.

Like “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” we expect that the protagonist in “The Gospel According to Mark” to remain on a kind of inviolate level as he reads Mark’s gospel. He should be on his own inviolate level, distant from the text in both space and time. However, just as Borges shows that Ryan Kilpatrick has been impossibly prefigured in Nolan’s plot, so too is Espinosa inextricably involved in Mark’s gospel. By the end of “The Gospel According to Mark,” the protagonist-narrator Espinosa is incredibly, paradoxically endangered by the story that he himself is narrating.

Borges’s “The Gospel According to Mark” (1970) involves a young man by the name of Baltasar Espinosa, who is invited by his cousin Daniel to spend the summer months at Los Alamos ranch. Espinosa lives with the Gutres (formerly the English name Guthries), a family of three: “the father, the son (who was singularly rough and unpolished), and a girl of uncertain paternity” (398). The Gutres are vastly uncivilized, barely able to converse, and only “rarely” speak (398). They seemed to have forgotten even basic abilities of speech in their own language. Then a massive storm comes, flooding the nearby Salado River. Trapped on the ranch and looking for a way to occupy himself and the Gutres, Espinosa begins to read aloud to the Gutres the Mark’s gospel, narrating to them the events that surrounded Christ’s ministry and eventual crucifixion. The Gutres listen with absorption and attentiveness. Then one day, the father of the family asks Espinosa whether Christ had been killed to save all men, even the Roman soldiers. When Espinosa answers in the affirmative, the Gutres mock, spit on, and treat Espinosa roughly. Then they take Espinosa to the shed at the back of their house. Espinosa sees that the Gutres had pulled down the beams of the ceiling to make a cross (401). It is suggested that Espinosa has been committed by the Gutres to take Christ’s place, and will be further scourged and crucified.

The story's end is highly shocking, but there are many Scriptural allusions which point to the story's eventual end. It is only after seeing the conclusion do we fully realize their significance. But from the beginning, Espinosa is eerily Christ-like. For example, at the beginning of the tale, the narrator mentions that Espinosa, a man of "unlimited goodness" — and whose first name suggests a Jewish ethnicity — "did not like to argue; he preferred that his interlocutor rather than he himself be right" (397). The narrator mentions that Espinosa had reached the age of thirty-three, the same age as that of Jesus Christ when he was executed (395). The small, injured lamb that Espinosa impressively heals with pills serves as a reminder of both the Biblical picture of Christ as a lamb and the various miracles that Christ performed during his ministry (400). Espinosa grows out his beard, as would have been customary for a Jewish man to wear during the time of Christ (399). The Gutres steal the crumbs that Espinosa drops in the course of his meal, like poor dogs mentioned in the Gospel According to Mark (400). The young woman offers herself sexually to Espinosa, calling to mind Mary's willingness to carry the Christ child (401). Even the pattern of three in the Gutres family harkens to the Trinity (398). The story is heavy with these subtle hints to the story's final conclusion.

In order to involve Espinosa in the story that Espinosa himself is narrating, Borges must blur our convention markers for orientation; namely, time and space. He demonstrates this primarily through the Gutres family and their environment. The Gutres family is outside of conventional understanding of time and space. They are indeterminate. We can see this in the descriptions of Espinosa's investigation into the Gutres family history. Though Espinosa seems to take an interest in the family's history, the family is essentially voiceless throughout the story. The family is barely articulate and Espinosa remarks at one point that "[c]onversation [with the Gutres] was not easy" (398). In fact, the Gutres are unable to explain much of anything. Though

they know much about the country, the “did not know how to explain” their country knowledge (398). The family also has little conception of history. When Espinosa asks them if they remember the Indian raids during the time when the frontier command was in Junín, they answer in the affirmative, but Espinosa almost immediately disregards their answer:

They told him they did, but they would have given the same answer if he had asked them about the day Charles I had been beheaded. Espinosa recalled that his father used to say that all the cases of longevity that occur in the country are the result of either poor memory or a vague notion of dates — gauchos quite often know neither the year they were born in nor the name of the man that fathered them (399).

The English Bible that Espinosa finds at the ranch has blank pages at the end, which contained a handwritten record of the Gutres lineage (399). And though Espinosa is finally able to learn that the Gutres family had come from Inverness and they had reached the New World some time later, “[t]he chronicle came to an end in the eighteen-seventies; they [the Gutres family] no longer knew how to write. Within a few generations they had forgotten their English; by the time Espinosa met them, even Spanish gave them some difficulty” (399). Espinosa doesn’t even know the paternity of the girl of the family, and is uncertain on when the foreman’s wife had died (398). And thus we see that the Gutres are entirely disconnected from time. Espinosa notes that “they were like children, who prefer repetition to variety or novelty” (400). They have no understanding of the past and lack any ability to face or consider the future.

In addition to their timelessness, the Gutres even seem to occupy an liminal space. At the outset of the story, we are given the story’s very specific locality: “Los Alamos ranch, south of the small town of Junín” (397). But almost from that point forward, location becomes much less focused. This blurriness, as we’ve seen, reaches its climax in Borges’s descriptions of the Gutres

family, which allows for Borges to create the eerie effect of the repetition of history or story. When the Salado floods, the geography is suddenly uncertain. Borges chooses “sea, desert, and Old Testament imagery to describe the plains of the Buenos Aires province,” melding together Middle East with the Western hemisphere (Hall 527). As Espinosa considers the landscape after the flood, even ground and water become interchangeable: Espinosa “realized that the metaphor equating the pampas to the sea was not, at least that morning, an altogether false one” (398). Roads disappear entirely. The clear boundaries between Espinosa’s space and the Gutres’s space also shifts when a leak threatens the family home and Espinosa lends them use of a room near the toolshed, at the back of the main house (398). Such territorial shifts makes Espinosa miss “places in the city he never went,” places of little to no consequence but nonetheless grounded him in the civilized, organized life of Buenos Aires (399).

Though the Gutres occupy an amorphous, indeterminate time and space, it seems that one element of their lineage has remained. “They had no faith,” Espinosa notes, “though in their veins, alongside the superstitions of the pampas, there still ran a dim current of the Calvinist’s harsh fanaticism” (400). When Espinosa reads to the family, despite their inability to understand it, they are inexplicably absorbed. “It’s in their blood,” Espinosa thinks (400). Though Borges intentionally takes the Gutres out of any clear sense of timing, blurring temporal clarity, Borges instills this family with a kind of hereditary disease: an amorphous, unfixed existence. But when Espinosa narrates to them a *story*, with characters given distinct roles, the Gutres family members play their respective “parts” with chilling readiness, wolfing down their meals so as to attentively study their part when Espinosa reads it to them (400).

Thus, we see how the Gutres, with their indeterminate sense of time and space, come to adopt the textual world of the Gospel of Mark *as if it were real*. Borges eliminates for the

characters and for us readers the reference points that would serve to refute the story's reenactment. But from the perspective of the Gutres, Christ is Espinosa and Espinosa, Christ. The dissonance between the hot deserts of Israel and the flooded pampas is of no concern, nor is the historical distance that exists between the event of Christ's death and the murder that they commit against Espinosa. The Gutres are in a Strange Loop without even realizing it, doomed to repeat whatever events are narrated to them.

In this story, there is a tension between the timeless, indeterminate spatial existence of the Gutres and the historic, spatially bound Espinosa. Espinosa is very well grounded in time and in space. He is educated and has a great understanding of geography and history. In the story, he rationally evaluates illusions, as when Espinosa remembers that "Hudson had noted that [of the land and sea,] the sea seems the grander of the two because we view it not from horseback or our own height, but from the deck of a ship" (398). Espinosa is able to distinguish between perception and reality, remaining detached from Mark's gospel whilst the Gutres hang onto his every word. Espinosa does not even notice the parallels between his own life and Christ's. We as readers are also meant to glide over the many hints along the way *until* we read the abrupt ending of the story. Borges pushes the final, horrible moment of Espinosa's impending execution to the last possible line so as to reveal to us, in a very sudden flash, that Espinosa is much more like Christ than we had originally perceived. In fact, to the Gutres, unbound by time and space, Espinosa and Christ become one and the same.

Though Espinosa believed himself to belong to the inviolate level, narrating Mark's gospel from a position of power *outside* the text, in the Gutres's indeterminate reality, Espinosa himself is narrating his own story. This, of course, is a Strange Loop: one cannot narrate their own story. Yet in "The Gospel According to Mark," Espinosa becomes the narrator of his own

Christ-like life, “ministry,” and death. At one point, Espinosa muses that “throughout history, humankind has told two stories: the story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean seas in quest of a beloved isle, and the story of a god who allows himself to be crucified on Golgotha” (400). Espinosa wrongly assumes that he is of “history” rather than “story.” But just like Borges’s protagonist in “The Plot,” Espinosa “dies, but he does not know that he has died so that a scene can be played out again” (307). Espinosa becomes one of the narratives echoed throughout time. Espinosa *does* become story.

The shock for the reader comes when they realize that they too have been reading a story. “The Gospel According to Mark” is itself *another* retelling of a story retold. And in this paper, I am retelling a story of a story retold, of a story retold. As long as it exists, the story gestures out towards us, suggesting that there are infinite, dangerous repercussions for narration.

Borges often captures the curious, intriguing mysteries of literature. His stories often have the feeling of a riddle or a puzzle. But here, Borges examines the horror of a story repeated *ad infinitum*. In much the same way that *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* were inevitably reenacted in “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” so too are *The Odyssey* and the gospels held up as one of the inevitable tales to be repeated throughout time. For the Gutres family, removed from all indicators of space and time, it is narration that opens up the possibility for impossible repetitions. And in Espinosa’s case, the repetition is likely fatal.

The last example of a Borgesian Strange Loop is also the most literal. In one of Borges’s longest stories, “The Immortal,” Borges constructs a setting, a “City of the Immortals.” This city seems to have jumped straight into the text from one of Escher’s prints. As the story’s protagonist, Rufus travels into the city, he finds over and over again that though he has continuously moved *away* from a given point in space in the city, he continually finds himself

back where he started. As we shall see, these Strange Loops are not only baffling; they actually fragment Rufus's mind, inspiring terrible horror and anxiety and forcing him to forget the specifics of his journey into the city.

In usual Borgesian fashion, the center tale in "the Immortal" is nested inside other frame narratives. The heart of the narrative follows a man by the name of Marcus Flaminius Rufus, who is given the task of finding the legendary City of the Immortals, "far at the ends of the earth, where men's lives are everlasting" (184). Rufus loses his entire entourage of soldiers, eventually wandering the desert for days before waking up with his hands tied in a makeshift grave, amongst the troglodytes, "naked men with gray skin and neglected beards" (185). Eventually and with enormous effort, Rufus frees himself and crosses a stream toward the City, trailed by one of the troglodytes. The City sits on a large stone plateau. Though Rufus struggles to find the City's entrance, he makes his way into the City of the Immortals via a series of labyrinthine caverns, "an almost endless series of underground rooms, in which all but one of nine doors lead back to the same room" (Butler 187). The City itself is an impossible, intellectually horrible construction of "friezes and the capitals of columns, triangular pediments and vaults, confused glories carved in granite and marble" with senseless constructions and useless, dangling features (187). Initially, Rufus is struck by the City's manifest antiquity which seemed to him "in accord with the labor of immortal artificers" (187). But then to "the impression of endlessness," he writes, came "the sensation of oppressiveness and horror, the sensation of complex irrationality" (188). The City is like a labyrinth, "a house built purposely to confuse men" (188). Rufus wanders this city for an indeterminate amount of time and has no memory of how he managed to escape to tell the tale.

In the midst of the overwhelming description of the City of the Immortals, it's almost easy to overlook the underground rooms below the City. Eight out of nine of each of the doors in each of the underground cellars "led to a maze that returned, deceitfully, to the *same* chamber; the ninth led through another maze to a second circular chamber identical to the first. I am not certain how many chambers there were; my misery and anxiety multiplied them" (187, my emphasis). As I pointed out in refuting Parker, one can walk through a door frame from both directions without creating any kind of spatial incongruity. A door is simultaneously an entrance and an exit, and one *expects* to travel through a doorway to get from one space to another, much in the same way that one would *expect* to climb from one level to another on a flight of stairs. However, in this story, eight out of nine doors is a "treacherously" rendered Strange Loop. In each chamber, Borges allows his protagonist a one in nine chance at escaping the Strange Loop.

Interestingly, Borges does not trap Rufus within this Loop, but elegantly allows his protagonist to navigate through the City of the Immortals. However, Rufus loses his ability to articulate or even remember how he has managed to escape the City:

I cannot recall the stages by which I returned, nor my path through the dusty, humid crypts. I know only that I was accompanied by the constant fear that when I emerged from the last labyrinth I would be surrounded once again by the abominable City of the Immortals. I remember nothing else. That loss of memory, now insurmountable, was perhaps willful; it is possible that the circumstances of my escape were so unpleasant that on some day no less lost to memory I swore to put them out of my mind (188).

The narrator even talks about how his memory fails him when describing the City: "I cannot say whether these are literal examples I have given," Rufus admits, "I can no longer know whether

any given feature is a faithful transcription of reality or one of the shapes unleashed by my nights” (188). He guesses that his escape was so horrible that he had forced himself to forget it.

In much the same way that the encounter with a Strange Loop causes odd things to happen in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” so too does this search and ultimate encounter with the City of the Immortals result in horrible distortions of experience. The protagonist’s encounter with this city is such that it has “so distorted the memory of our first days that now they are impossible to put straight” (184). His memory has been tainted (184, 188). As he searches for the city, temporality becomes grossly distorted. Temporal cues like “night” and “day” are given spatial terminology. The “vast night” engulfs some of the protagonist’s fellow travelers (185). He wanders alone in the desert on “one huge day multiplied by the sun” (185). Time is cut up without transition and with indeterminate gaps. “I cannot say how many days and nights passed over me,” the protagonist says as he takes shelter on the bank opposite the City. “I let the moon and the sun cast lots for my bleak fate” (186). The search is also tainted with distortions, ironies. The group of men who are on the quest to search for the City of the Immortals slowly dwindles (184).

Rufus’s encounter with the Strange Loop of the City actually causes his thoughts and words to unravel, influencing the narration of both past and present. “I do not want to describe it,” Rufus says, “a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull pullulating with teeth, organs, and heads monstrosly yoked together yet hating each other” (188). The disintegration of Rufus’s ability to describe what he has seen after encountering the City signals to us the enormity of its effect. The City’s construction is entirely without a correspondence to reality, leaving Rufus to only be tortured by “approximate images” (188).

However, Borges has not entirely left behind the literary in this foray into Strange Loop architecture. Borges actually makes the argument that the City does not only encapsulate all of the universe. The impossibility, the perdurability of the City's Strange Loop construction even extends to its very narration. In "Infinity and One," critic Butler writes,

[W]hat kind of story is it that can never be exhausted, that can keep on being retold? This is both one of the questions 'El inmortal' [The Immortal] asks and one of the questions at stake in reading it. The answer Borges provides is surprising. It is not that immortality is some enigma which cannot be fathomed, that remains the same beneath all of its various retellings. It is rather because immortality is equivalent to its narration, and does not exist before it, that it lives on for ever. Immortality *is* its narration (182).

So finally Borges *does* return to his ultimate love: literature's unique capacity for the Strange Loop. When all is said and done no words remain for Rufus; "there are only words" (194).

Paradoxes, like the Strange Loop, have the possibility for two effects. The first is whimsy and playfulness. The second is horror and anxiety. Interestingly, both have been noted in Borges's stories. Annie Dillard sees Borges's sneaky intrusions into the various frames of a story as "slip[ping] us a wink." "The novel is a game or a joke shared between author and reader," Dillard writes, "Borges appears in his own work as a mythical intelligence. [...] All these interruptions and cameo appearances *celebrate* the art of it all; they remind us that we are as it were in a theater, and that the narrative itself is a conscious and willed artifice" (44-45). In reading Borges, it's easy to wonder whether he is toying with the reader, creating highly intellectual and clever riddles as a way to confound the reader.

Yet the sinister side seems clear throughout these works as well. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," "The Gospel According to Mark," and

“The Immortal,” there is a danger that always seems to be linked to the Strange Loop. All of these stories are weighed down by a mood of anxiety and danger. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Tsun and Dr. Albert seemed to be locked together, destined to enact a senseless murder. When Dr. Albert tells Tsun about the forking paths of time, Tsun describes how he felt “all about me and within my obscure body an invisible, intangible pullulating — not that of the divergent, parallel, and finally coalescing armies, but an agitation more inaccessible, more inward than that, yet one those armies somehow prefigured” (126). This swarming sensation, this sensory experience of sideshadowed realities, occurs again in the text and Tsun calls it a “nightmare” (126). Moments after this second sensation, Tsun kills Dr. Albert. The intellectual revelation in the story is coupled with danger and death. Not only that, but there also seems to be a break in Tsun’s sanity as well. Tsun believes that his actions, as reported in the newspaper, have indicated to the Germans where they should bomb. However, Dr. Albert’s murder was reported in the *same* newspaper as that of the eventual bombing, thus invalidating the causation. In “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” the young Ryan Kilpatrick is staggered and disquieted at how history copies literature, worried that his own actions have been foretold in some story; which, of course, it has — at the very least by Jorge Luis Borges himself (146). Ryan loses the words to indicate his anxieties and so resolves only to keep silent. In “The Gospel According to Mark,” the protagonist left teetering on the edge of being forced to reenact the most violent and notorious death of all history. And lastly in “The Immortal,” the City inspires horror and intellectual dread in the face of temporal and spatial paradox, such that the protagonist suffers from loss of words and memory to articulate the Strange Loops he encountered there.

Some of this predilection toward murder, horror, and mayhem may stem from the tropes of a detective story, a genre that Borges worked in extensively. “The Garden of Forking Paths”

and “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” both carry some of the generic conventions of the detective story. However, neither “The Gospel According to Mark” nor “The Immortal” really seems to qualify as a detective story. And we are still left with the weight of anxiety around the Strange Loop paradox. So while we find high playfulness in Borges’s cleverness and intellectual romping, the destinies of his characters brings Borges’s readers to an uneasy end, considering the vertiginous and indeterminate ends of the Strange Loop.

Some critics have pointed out that Borges’s works could be characterized as “mere formalist games, mathematical experiments devoid of any sense of human responsibility and unrelated even to the author’s own life” (Irby xviii). Indeed, many have noted the gaming quality to some of Borges’s stories. It can be difficult to shake the worry that Borges, with all of his brilliance and learning, is just giving us the proverbial run-around. But for all of Borges’s mystical language, etymologically correct word play, and literary games, behind the text stands a lucid and ponderous man. While not above high playfulness in his texts, Borges approached his intellectual questions with a fervor; intrigued by and obsessed with those questions that to him stand at the very center of the human condition: time and space. With his literary “habits” or preoccupations, Borges listed “space (Buenos Aires), the archive of cultural secrets (‘the cult of the elders’), philosophy (Germanic studies), time identity, and the possibility of community” (Johnson 209). And as Johnson points out, not all items on this list of preoccupations were equal to Borges. Above all, the most compelling problem of human existence is time. “I think that the central riddle, the central problem of metaphysics — let us call it thinking,” Borges said in an interview, “is time, not space. Space is one of the many things to be found inside of time — as you find, for example, color or shapes or sizes or feelings” (Burgin 123).

In literary and philosophical circles, Borges was not alone in privileging time over space. In “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin defines the chronotope (which literally means “time space”) as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature,” but maintains that the problem of time is the “dominant principle in the chronotope” (86). Johnson also relates how the privileging time over space corresponds to Kant’s argument “that as time is the a priori form of inner sense, there can be no sensibility, thus no experience whatsoever, that is not temporally determined” (211). All things are contained by time.

Why then, if time is what Borges considers to be the central problem of human existence, have I spent so long in relating the spatial dimension to Borges’s fictional musings? Why promote Hofstadter’s paradoxical architecture as a means of exploring Borges’s obsessions? Borges clearly maintained that space was of lesser consequence to him than time — but it impossible to argue that space does not play a crucial role in his literary labyrinths. First, even in his denial of space’s predominance over time, Borges uses spatial language (“[s]pace is one of the many things to be found *inside* of time”). And so it is throughout Borges’s fictions. For example, in “The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise” (1929), Borges explores Zeno’s paradox, which Borges outlines as follows:

Achilles, symbol of speed, has to catch up with the tortoise, symbol of slowness. Achilles runs ten times faster than the tortoise and so gives him a ten-meter advantage. Achilles runs those ten meters, the tortoise runs one; Achilles runs that meter, the tortoise runs a decimeter; Achilles runs that decimeter, the tortoise runs a centimeter [...] *ad infinitum*, so that Achilles can run forever without catching up. Hence the immortal paradox (*Collected Non-Fictions* 44).

Though Borges may be preoccupied primarily with time, the spatial metaphor Hofstadter's Strange Loop is a useful tool in that fixation. Borges often spatializes time and temporalizes space (Johnson 217). Lastly, though Borges seems to maintain the distinction between space and time so far as to uphold time over space, that is not to say that his fictions are so inflexible. Critics have noted, for example, how uncannily prophetic Borges's stories were in prefiguring Einstein's general theory of relativity.

The questions of time *and* space that Borges explored in different degrees throughout his writings are not merely the literary contemplations of an intellectual elitist. Paradoxes, like Hofstadter's Strange Loop, haunt the human experience. We see this in Borges's discussion of Zeno's paradox:

[Zeno's paradox] is an attempt upon not only the reality of space but the more invulnerable and sheer reality of time. I might add that existence in a physical body, immobile permanence, the flow of an afternoon in life, are challenged by such an adventure. Such deconstruction, by means of only one word, *infinite*, a worrisome word (and then a concept) we have engendered fearlessly, once it besets our thinking, explores and annihilates it. [...] Zeno is incontestable, unless we admit the ideality of space and time. If we accept idealism, [...] then we shall elude the *mise en abîme*⁵ of the paradox. Would this bit of Greek obscurity affect our concept of the universe? —my reader will ask (47).

The vertiginous nature of Zeno's paradox, Borges says, lies in the fretfulness of the word "infinite." The human experience, the "adventure" of life in a body is worried by the concept of the infinite. For Borges, all paradoxical iterations — like self-reference, like the Strange Loop — present the danger of being *mise en abîme*, the worry that a "single repetition is enough to

destroy time,” as Johnson writes (215). Borges invokes the paradox and the eternal in order to sort through the contradiction, where “to delay time, one hand, means to deny the very condition of life; [...] on the other hand it means to desire more time insofar as time is delay” (Johnson 218). And like Zeno, Borges’s stories pose to the reader a question: Would this bit of literature affect our concept of the universe?

In an afterward to one of Borges’s short story collections, he made some one-sentence descriptors of the stories contained therein. “I doubt that the hurried notes I have just dictated,” Borges writes, “will exhaust this book, but hope, rather, that the dreams herein will continue to ramify within the hospitable imaginations of the readers who now close it” (485). So too, does this essay close.

APPENDIX A

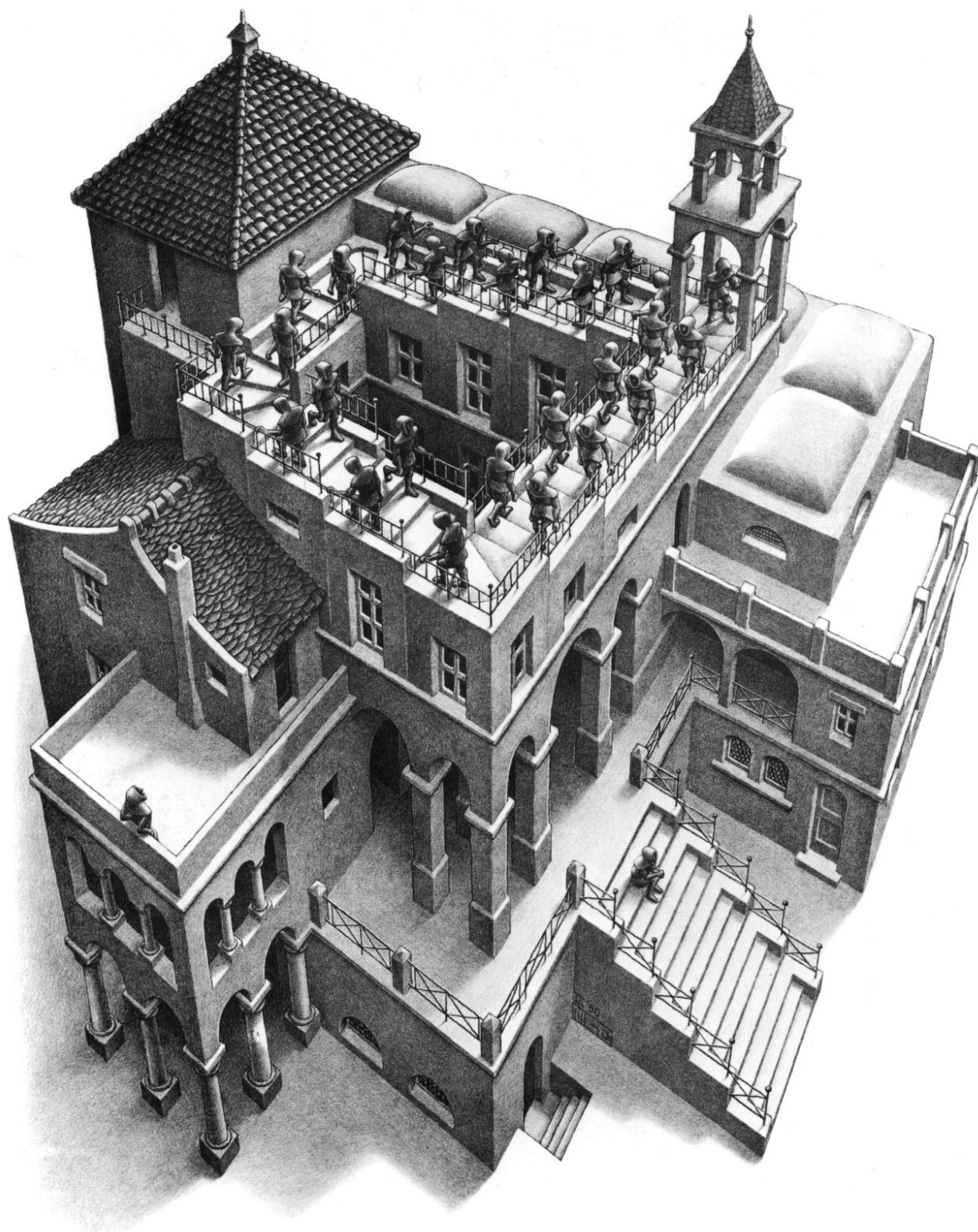


Fig 1. "Ascending and Descending" by M.C. Escher.

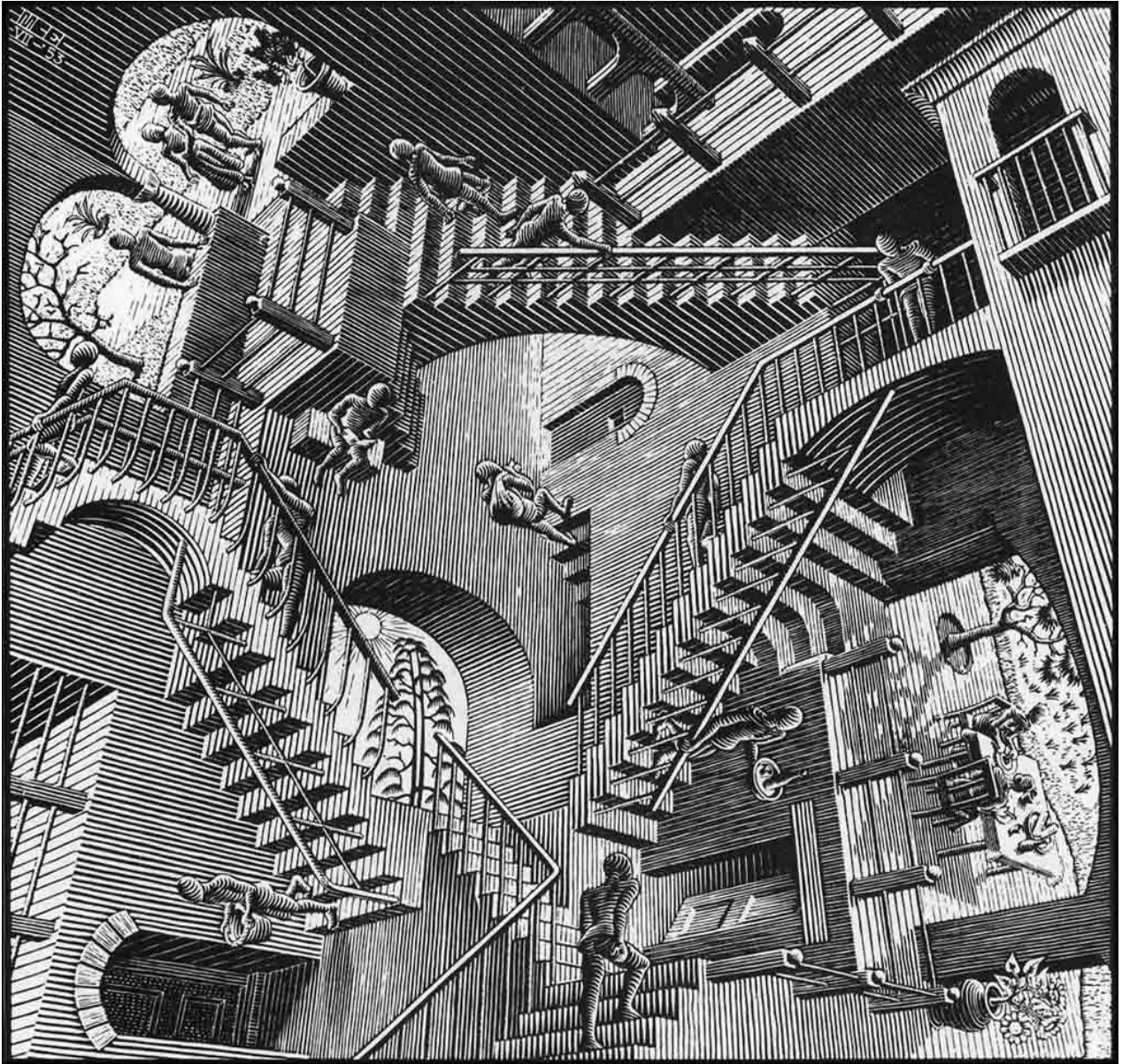


Fig. 2. "Relativity" by M.C. Escher



Fig. 3. A circular labyrinth.

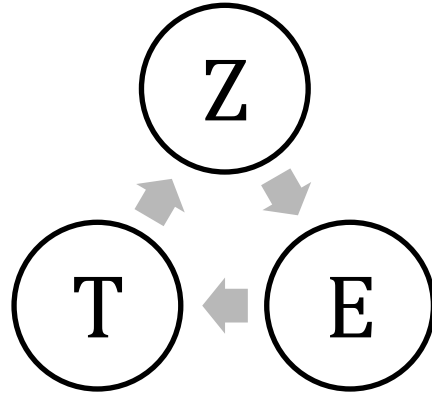


Fig. 4. An “authorship triangle.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Hereafter referred to as *GEB*.

² From Joyce's short story "Araby," found in *Dubliners*.

³ Here, we must remember the correct geometric terminology for "parallel," as Borges has a "penchant for what seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rhetoricians called 'hard' or 'philosophic' words, and will often use them in their strict etymological sense, restoring radical meanings with an effect of metaphorical novelty" (Irby xix-xx). Parallel lines continue to extend forever, side by side, but by definition they never touch.

⁴ To bring this discussion of the historic to the present day and perhaps even more bewilderingly, "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" has spawned a fringe theatrical production called *Who Killed Fergus Kilpatrick?* which was debuted in Ireland in 2009.

⁵ French, "Placed into abyss." Fascinatingly, the phrase was also used to describe the *droste* effect, which describes the visual experience of standing between two mirrors and seeing the infinite reproduction and regression of one's image. In painting, *mise en abîme* refers to the formal technique in which an image contains a smaller copy of itself, in a sequence appearing to recur indefinitely. Also related to *composition en abîme*, the placing of a composition within another composition. Borges explores these ideas explicitly in "When Fiction Lives in Fiction."

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Integration of Faith and Learning

One of my favorite verses in Scripture is, perhaps, a strange one: “Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face” (Job 13:15). The first portion of the verse speaks to what level of commitment I feel is demanded for those who follow Christ. It is a verse that seems to call for a willingness for annihilation. It is a verse that viscerally seems to be misanthropic, a dangerous theology. It is the second part of the verse that speaks to this concern: though I trust, though I love, though I hope in Him, *yet* I will argue my ways to his face. In my faith and in my work as a scholar, I feel that a love of God is preeminent. Service to Him is *crucial*. Yet God is in relationship with us. I can struggle with all kinds of doubts and intellectual questions and scholarship that seems to point to the darkest places in the human heart. But for a reason I *cannot articulate*, I still remain and my trust in Him is steadfast.

I see in this choice of Scripture a kind of reflection of my own faith journey as well. It is how I frame my world and my work in scholarship. It is a call to the most radical intellectual and emotional boundaries, a facing of our worst fears and questions about who God is.

For much of my young adult life, I grew up in a church, hearing theological teaching that tended to emphasize healing the “hang-ups” common to middle-class suburban life through a relationship with Jesus. Though the church I grew up in supported missions, activism in the community, and caring for the poor and downtrodden — all things that I support — it left my spiritual *mind* starving for food. By the time I was in junior high and early high school, every sermon felt like a review, and my learning in the church seemed to be at stagnant at best. I was absolutely a part of the Christian family — but I was quickly becoming dissatisfied. There was, for example, a frustrating ambiguity or lack of conviction on hermeneutics.

In addition to the lack of methodological self-consciousness in my faith community, I began struggling with more person, dark questions. “How good is good enough?” is a question that can seem almost pat to Protestant ears, but it began to plague me. I could give myself the necessary reassurance about Jesus’s work on the cross. I could remind myself that it was God’s delight to forgive. *Yet* I could not feel the joy that was supposed to accompany such doctrinal understanding. I was finally recognizing the true gravity of my sin. I was finally coming to see God’s holiness. But the appallingly thin foundation of theological learning did little to comfort me in my distress.

So, I was forced to learn. I was forced to explore. What was most formational during this time was a series of very intense and extensive debates I had with a fellow student about Calvinism. Having grown up in an Arminian theology (though, admittedly, I wasn’t entirely sure what this actually meant), I was disgusted by the Calvinistic doctrine my fellow student and friend was espousing, so I engaged him in debate. Though driven by pride and stubbornness, it was one of the first times I actually *studied* Scripture, the first time I realized the deep implication of seemingly small changes in words. Translation and hermeneutics suddenly became essential to feed my curiosity, my burning desire to formulate answers to his questions — both the student’s and my own.

Previous to these debates, I had a blissfully uncomplicated doctrinal formation. I believed in God, I believed in the Trinity, I believed in the gospel (Jesus coming to die and save broken, sinful man). But my mind was largely untrained for intellectual subtlety in my faith, untrained for deep questions and unwilling to hear frightening answers. In a search for cures to my spiritual depression and dark questions, I was forced to confront all manner of challenges about the nature of God. I found a new vocabulary for the study of Scripture by writers and thinkers who actually

took time to examine *how* they distilled knowledge from the Bible. In the end, I “converted” to the very Calvinistic doctrine that I was fighting against.

I found within the Reformed tradition a *wealth* of brave intellectuals. I admired their commitments. While my father (who had originally started out training to be a pastor) admitted to me that he found theology “boring” and my mother became deeply upset when I questioned the intellectual discipline in the church I grew up in, the reformed thinkers I was reading encouraged the hard questions and offered difficult responses. The answers were not always *complete* or even satisfactory — the God of the Reformed tradition is a God of mystery as well — but they demanded much.

During this time of searching and study, I also discovered a particular love for the book of Job. In this story I saw an exploration of all the darkest questions about evil and about God’s nature. I saw in the rejection of Job’s friends the rejection of pat, easy answers. In the final, glorious encounter Job has with the terrifying and generous God of the universe, only one thing is left clear: God is worthy to be served. Though I have encountered all kinds of attacks on God’s goodness, love, and existence, this central resonance has never left.

I had grown up loving education — and particularly literature. But it was only after this time in high school and into college when I started formulating the groundwork for how my faith intersected with my studies.

I find great wisdom in Jacobsen and Jacobsen’s observations on the scholarly mode: that the scholar must pay attention to the world (or a portion of it) with intensity and care. I believe for the Christian scholar, there is an earnestness to discover what things *actually* mean. There is a demand for honesty. This demand also forces the Christian scholar to be reflective on their own limitations, to develop ways in which they can meditative on their own methodology. Marsden

likewise addresses this idea when he explains that the Christian doctrine of human fallibility instills a humility in the Christian scholar, a humility that demands self-examination (95).

In light of these things, it is my great desire to be as intellectually honest and brave as I can in my scholarship. At times, I know that I will have to be willing to be shamed by the world. I may be asked to account for something, to *explain* an aspect of my faith in light of certain scholarship, that I am unable to explain. I will strive to always “hope in him” during those times, but as a Christian scholar, I cannot allow my need for comfort to oversimplify, or distort that which I seek to study.

For those who love literature, there is oftentimes the impulse to justify our study of literature by saying that literature can make us better people. The blog *Better Living Through Beowulf: How Great Literature Can Change Your Life* testifies that literature “is as vital to our lives as food and shelter” (“About”). This person writes how literature holds the key to our problems with divorce, heartbreak, identity crisis, and death. It can teach us to fix broken systems in our jobs and in our nation. There are the Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL) and the Prison Performing Arts (PPA) programs, which attempt to rehabilitate convicted criminals through literature. There are authors like Jack Hitt, who have reported how Act V of *Hamlet* instructs criminals to review the consequences of the murders they themselves have committed (“Act V”). Many espouse the belief that “books can make us better” without giving it a second thought.

I was one of these people. When I get lost in Borges’ images of infinity in *Labyrinths*, break apart the dialogue in Anouilh’s *Antigone*, meditate on sin and guilt in Gide’s *The Immoralist*, or fly upon Keats’ wings of Poesy — my mind is alight by literature. I feel its

power. I experience great delight in its study. This enchantment is so striking that I find it easy to believe that words have the power to change hearts and people.

However, I can no longer believe that literature can change lives in the way that I previously believed. This is why: Scripture demands preeminence, promising its sufficiency in our lives. If I must lose one short story from Hemingway in order to save a single line from Philemon, I must toss Hemingway into the fire. If I could forever rescue a word from destruction from Leviticus by erasing all of Dickens from the earth, then I must do away with Dickens. Out of all the congregation of books in the universe, I can prize none so highly as I do Scripture. As author Tony Reinke once explained, “Man-made literature may be inspiring, but it is not divinely inspired —not in the way Scripture is inspired. Man-made literature may be empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody biblical truth, but it’s not breathed out by God. Man-made literature may contain truth, goodness, and beauty, but it is also fallible, imperfect, and of temporary value” (27).

Yet the conviction that literature is important *remains*. The joy that I experience from the written word is *real*. The influence of stories on lives is real. My education, then, has been driven by the desire to find a way to unified these two motivations in my life: the desire to place Scripture in its supreme place and the motivation to find a meaning for the love I have of the written word. The solution came to me in the words of Basil of Caesarea (ca. AD 330-379), who once said, “For the journey of this life eternal I would advise you to husband resources, leaving no stone unturned [...] whence you might derive any aid” (qtd. in Reinke 75). Augustine likewise encouraged Christians that “if those who are called philosophers [...] have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use” (qtd. in Reinke 75). With the love that I have of the written word and a devotion to

its study, I hope to husband all resources I can from the books available to me. Literature that is not overtly Christian can echo spiritual truths, beg questions that can point us to Scripture, edify the soul, express beauty, expose hearts, and describe our world. It is my hope that I should take one of the most potent methods of human communication captive for Christ, not through bowdlerization but discernment, not through cowardly or lazy overgeneralization but with bravery and diligence. To me, to study Borges is not simply to sort through allusions, diction, plot structure, etc. To me, to study Borges is to face, head on, those questions which are ponderous to man and to consider them in the light of gentle faith.

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